

WORKSHOP / Fall Term 2015

FRIEDRICH SCHLEGEL: “ON INCOMPREHENSIBILITY”

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The epilogue to the *Athenäum* (1798-1800), which represents both the pinnacle and the disintegration of Early German Romanticism as such, consists of an essay by Friedrich Schlegel significantly titled *On Incomprehensibility*.

Viewed in its specific context, it primarily addresses the violent reactions of the reading public to many of the texts that had appeared in that same journal, most particularly to the *Fragments*, the immediate expression of Schlegel's ideal of writing based on a “concept of symphony” within the realm of philosophy, poetry and critique.

On the other hand, the more abstract or general purpose of this text raises questions that are still of great relevance today, namely the limits that are to be imposed on the claim to absolute comprehension, or the role of incomprehensibility and chaos as the means used «by reason» to give form to «the infinite world».

For years scholars have approached *On incomprehensibility* merely as a documentary piece of evidence that marks the end of the so-called *Frühromantik*. Its theoretical and critical implications, however, go far beyond its historical framework. The mass of notebooks, comments and projects of that period – such as the study *On Philology* (a sort of fragmentary treatise written around 1797 but first published in 1928) –, that would reveal themselves to be crucial to 20th century theories of hermeneutics and interpretation, all converge in a ruthless and rigorous manner in what would become Schlegel's final contribution to the *Athenäum*. His assumption that «words often understand each other among themselves better than those that make use of them» brings to mind – and ultimately calls into question – Walter Benjamin's concise and enigmatic utterance: «Perception is reading».

Bibliography:

Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe, Ed. E. Behler, Vol. 2, *Charakteristiken und Kritiken I* (1796-1801), Ed. H. Eichner, München, Paderborn, Wien, 1967.

English translation: *On Incomprehensibility*, in: J.M. Bernstein (Ed.), *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

The workshop will be structured around four core themes, divided into two sessions of three to four hours each.

I: READING – October 17 (2:00 to 6 p.m.)

- a) Brief presentation of the context, scope and main implications of the text.
- b) Reading and analysis of the key-concepts: Incomprehensibility and Irony, Critique and Polemics.
- c) Final discussion.

II: TRANSLATION – October 18 (2:00 to 6 p.m.)

- a) The experience of a text as physical confrontation. Immersion and emanation, proximity and distance, self-evidence (*Selbstverständlichkeit*) and incomprehensibility (*Unverständlichkeit*).
- b) The reverse side of the text: “Translation as a critical movement” vs. the “sacred limit” of the written word.
- c) Final discussion.